



Letter to the editor

A whale of a challenge for Pakistan and the World



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According to the World Health Organization, suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents worldwide (World Health Organization, 2017). Over the past years, the statistics have been worsening steadily with the emergence of manipulative online games like the Blue Whale Challenge which pose a serious threat to the youth. The online game created by a Russian psychology student with the intention of cleansing the society has been held responsible for hundreds of deaths in Russia alone.

This game comprises of a series of daily tasks assigned to the participants over a specific time period. With initial tasks merely involving waking up at odd hours designed to deprive an individual of sleep, or watching horror movies to weaken one's grasp of reality, the game gradually escalates to acts involving self-harm and even self-mutilation (Mathur, 2017). Compliance is ensured by threatening participants if they fail to perform a task or intend to withdraw and the players are expected to send pictures or videos as proof of completion of the tasks. By instilling feelings of negativity and promoting indulgence in reckless activities such as self-harm, the challenge aims to psychologically destabilize its targets and manipulates them to the extent of ultimately calling them out to commit suicide as the final task (Mathur, 2017). The game strategically traps the participants by boosting their self-esteem and giving them the much needed validation their life has been lacking. Completion of a task increases eagerness to reach the next level, thus heightening the addiction. It is still uncertain how participants gain access to the game, with some suggesting its existence on the dark web and social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Mathur, 2017).

It is the emotionally vulnerable and socially isolated adolescents, seeking acceptance and attention from their peers, who have been the primary victims. Moreover, adults leading a conflicted life and known to suffer from depression, have also reportedly fallen prey to the malicious game (Rohtaki, 2017). Incidents linked to the game have surfaced throughout the globe. Pakistan reported its first case in September 2017, when two female college students in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa were noticed to have inflicted injuries on their arms with a blade and were later found to be playing the aforesaid game (Kayani, 2017).

Cyberbullying through such games is known to have devastating effects on young impressionable minds, leading to serious mental health problems, depression and even death. Pakistan reportedly has the highest number of teenagers having an access to a mobile phone, which, when paired with few productive extracurricular activities for adolescents, lack of awareness regarding parental controls and an overall stigma attached to seeking help for mental health, ends up leading to a greater chances of involvement in such destructive activities (The News International, 2017). Due to Blue Whale's increasing popularity, it is critical that prompt measures be taken to restrict such content online, along with creating awareness about sensitive issues like suicide. Moreover, parents should be made aware of the potential risks their children are being exposed to through the internet and advised to vigilantly monitor their internet activity along with focusing on their mental health.

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SAH developed the original idea for the article. AK and AM drafted the initial manuscript. HF added further ideas. TFQ revised the article for intellectual content. All authors have read and approved the final paper.

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